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Power outage again shuts down Torrance refinery, leads to flaring

By Nick Green, Daily Breeze

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A regional power outage affecting about 100,000 Southern California Edison customers knocked the PBF Energy-owned Torrance refinery offline early Tuesday, forcing the plant to send up huge flares that belched thick black smoke plumes visible for miles.

The refinery lost power for 20 minutes after the 5:41 a.m. outage, which prompted the closure of roads near the refinery and the activation of barriers that closed Crenshaw and Del Amo boulevards adjacent to the plant.

Residents were urged to close all doors and windows and shelter in place; that directive was lifted at about 7:40 a.m.

“All safety systems at the refinery operated properly,” said Jeffrey Dill, president of the company’s Western region. “We have begun restarting operations, which will take days, and plan to do so safely with minimal noise and flaring.”

Flaring could continue for several days, officials said.

After initially saying there were no injuries, PBF later confirmed a Torrance Fire Department report that one refinery worker was transported to a local hospital for observation as a “precautionary measure.” The nature of the unidentified employee’s injuries were not disclosed.

Mayor Pat Furey told the Southern California News Group on Tuesday that the much-criticized automated robocall system meant to alert residents and nearby businesses to a refinery emergency “crashed” during the flaring event. He did not elaborate.

Torrance Fire Department Capt. Robert Millea referred questions about the issue to Battalion Chief David Dumais, who did not respond to a request for clarification.

But residents complained that it took about an hour between the time the Fire Department responded to the emergency call and the Torrance Alerts notification system was issued. It’s unknown if that was related to the problems the city encountered with the system.

Torrance residents like Michelle Kinman, a clean-energy advocate with the nonprofit Environment California Research & Policy Center, were unimpressed with the latest municipal response to a refinery emergency.

“Sadly, this is far from the first chance that the refinery and the city have had to fine-tune this alert system,” she said in a statement. “It is irresponsible and dangerous.”

Some north Torrance residents also noted that the alert provided insufficient information for residents to know accurately what was going on beyond a power outage.

Indeed, Torrance Alerts told residents to “shelter in place,” although no audible siren indicating the warning was heard.

That advice is the opposite of what experts say people should do if there is a release of potentially deadly hydrofluoric acid, which can form a highly toxic vapor at room temperature.

City officials acknowledged shortcomings with the automated system in the wake of a February 2015 explosion at the refinery and had pledged to improve it.

The outage Tuesday was just the latest in a series of power disruptions plaguing the refinery in recent weeks, all of which caused unplanned flaring events. Flaring reduces pressure at the plant and burns off excess gases but also leads to increased pollution in violation of air control standards.

One eyewitness said Tuesday that flames up to 40 feet high were spouting from the top of one flare and what appeared to be 20-foot-high flames erupted from another flare stack.

Thick black smoke was visible for nearly three hours.

PBF officials said workers monitored emissions and found that “zero readings” were detected.

But the Coalition for Clean Air, which has recently installed portable air monitors near the refinery, said its equipment did detect excess emissions.

The group said that from 6-9 a.m., its monitoring equipment recorded spikes in emissions above levels the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers “high.”

The cause of the power outage is under investigation, said Edison spokeswoman Susan Cox.

Power was restored to 63,000 of the affected customers in Gardena, Hawthorne, Hermosa Beach, Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach in addition to Torrance by 6:12 a.m., she said.

PBF reiterated Tuesday about the need for a more robust electrical system.

“Following the last outage, we initiated discussions with SCE about improving their grid to the refinery and will obviously look to accelerate those discussions and the action needed to be taken by SCE to have more reliable electricity to the refinery and the community,” Dill said.

PBF spokeswoman Betsy Brien did not clarify via email why the company believes the grid serving its plant is “different” from the systems that supply electricity to other refineries in the region.

She referred inquiries to Edison, which did not respond.

PBF said in a statement that it will be able to meet all its “commercial obligations in fuel markets.”

But Maureen Mauk, co-founder of FLARE — Families Lobbying Against Refinery Exposures — said the refinery and the tepid government response to its safety and pollution issues represents a threat to the safety of surrounding communities.

“The constant outages, poor electrical infrastructure, flaring, lack of air quality reporting and looming nightmare of a larger disaster given the refinery’s use of hydrofluoric acid have created a physical and environmental threat here in Torrance and the surrounding beach cities,” she said via email.

“Our government exists to keep us safe. They have failed us here in Torrance.”

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